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SUBJECT: Leftists Moderate Tone and Strategy, but Maintain Radical Links

¶1. (U) Summary: President Colom linked Guatemala's violence to extreme social and economic inequality during a two day conference entitled, "Political Change in Latin America: the State, Democracy

and Social Policy." Public officials, including President Colom, academics, journalists and foreign dignitaries discussed the role of the left in shaping and implementing social and economic policy in Latin America. In doing so, Colom, alongside other speakers, acknowledged democracy, transparency and accountability as keys to success. However, while the event featured many moderates, space was made for far left rhetoric - some of it anti-U.S. - and Cuban embassy officials attended. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The Secretary of Peace (SEPAZ), Orlando Blanco, NGOs and academic institutions hosted a conference in Guatemala City from October 21-23 titled "Political Change in Latin America: the State, Democracy and Social Policy." The event focused on the role of the left in Latin America and the implementation of public policy to spur equality and social justice. The program featured mostly leftist academics, politicians, technocrats and different NGO representatives. The conference was well attended (around 200 people on the day Poloff attended), with the bulk of the crowd comprised of students from the public University of San Carlos and government employees from SEPAZ and the Ministry of Education.

¶3. (U) President Colom opened the conference and described an intrinsic link between violence and social inequality, two issues that plague Guatemala. Colom noted that Guatemala's extreme inequality demanded political and economic change. He said that a conference participant had told him "not to worry about the rates of homicide or assault, (but rather) to worry about inequality." Colom proclaimed that he would pursue such change peacefully and address policy opportunities as they presented themselves. He also touted the role of the Administration's social programs such as My Family Progresses and Open Schools in alleviating poverty.

¶4. (U) Although many prominent members of Guatemala's left were guerrilla supporters or members during the 1960-1996 civil conflict, the modern Guatemalan leftist movement has embraced democratic principles and conference attendees nodded in agreement with speakers that advocated for social and economic change through democracy. Further, the crowd offered a warm reception to comments asserting that such change begins with transparency, accountability and respect for human rights by the government.

¶5. (U) Despite the overall moderate tone of the conference, it was evident that radical elements continue to wield some influence.

Cuban Embassy officials were lauded at the event and Cuban academics participated. Further, some on the left still view the United States as a threat. One academic chided the United States for inciting the Global Financial Crisis and claimed that the crisis has vindicated those that opposed neo-liberal economic policies. In other speakers' remarks regarding the United States, there was little acknowledgment of the change in the U.S. administration and what that might mean for the inter-American relations. Instead, the speaker described the United States as a regional aggressor and opposed "U.S. military bases" in Colombia.

16. (SBU) Comment: The remarks by President Colom and others indicate that some in the Guatemalan left are committed to change through democracy and the rule of law. Indeed, Colom has staked the success of his government on its ability to deliver economic progress and improved social welfare for the rural poor. Until now he has had limited success. Nevertheless, there are still links to radical leftists, and to Latin American authoritarian governments. However, we do not see significant grassroots support for Chavez-style socialist populism. End comment.  
Robinson